

Singer earns a gold star

A smash at Peabody's

By EDWARD HILL

MUSIC CRITIC

After receiving a gold record for her self-titled debut album at Peabody's DownUnder Monday night, Melissa Etheridge gave a dazzling, ballad-laden performance that blurred the line between folk and rock.

Etheridge performed one brilliant composition after another. She was evocative of Joan Baez one moment, and singing in a gravel-throated rock rasp the next. Etheridge's Cleveland debut was one of the hottest concerts to hit the North Coast this year.

The crowd cheered her through all of the songs from the album. But the audience, consisting mainly of young women, was as enthusiastic when Etheridge sang the unfamiliar songs from her upcoming LP, "Brave and Crazy."

She opened with "Chrome-Plated Heart," her celebration of finding the strength to get out of a bad love affair. Etheridge, settling into the audience, plucked the strings of her acoustic guitar slowly. Her band, at first, played a bit too loud, but quickly corrected itself.

Because she had received the gold record earlier, Etheridge was obviously charged up for the performance. Her happiness and excitement carried over into every tune, but didn't steal the emotion of serious songs.

Etheridge is a highly animated performer who seems to parody the stock moves of early rock stars. On "No Souvenirs" she brandished her guitar as though it were electric, and dueled with her bass player, Kevin McCormick. She is a com-



MELISSA ETHERIDGE: Charged up for Peabody's performance.

MUSIC

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manding performer who never lets go of the audience.

"Occasionally" was the show's emotional highlight. Etheridge sang softly, her voice trembling with sorrow, as many audience members wiped away tears. On that song she sang with no accompaniment, patting her guitar to produce a percussive effect.

On "Similar Features" she remained suitably passionate. She sang the ballad seated on a stool.

and it was easy to imagine the homespun singer from a small town in Kansas as the injured party. Etheridge — dressed in faded jeans, a drab olive blouse and a vest — has a straight-off-the-farm freshness.

She performs with a three-man band that offered tight support throughout the show. The bass and drums provide the rhythm line for the music, and light keyboard phrases are used to punctuate Etheridge's guitar, always the focus of the sound. The band really showed off its rock roots on "Brave and Crazy." Backing her up on "Skin Deep," it exhibited a great loyalty to the folk tradition.

On "Royal Station," Etheridge

performed a harmonica solo, showing that her music also is influenced strongly by the blues. As a folk writer, this is her obligatory piece on the symbolism of the trains coming and going.

Etheridge chose "Bring Me Some Water," the song that won her a Grammy nomination for best rock performance by a female, as her finale. Watching her perform this song down on her knees, it was clear that she is a performer with that rare ability to tap into rock's vital core.

Etheridge gave a solidly packed 90 minutes of song and passion. Her fire burned undiminished through 18 songs, each more energetic than the one before.

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